

# AGENCY AND COMMUNION IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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## AGENTIC AND COMMUNAL SOCIAL MOTIVES

*Kenneth D. Locke*

Social motives – motives that energize and guide social life – can be organized into two broad categories: agentic and communal (Horowitz et al., 2006; Wiggins, 1991; see also Abele & Wojciszke, this volume, and the other chapters in this volume). Agentic social motives induce people to stand out and get ahead – for example, by demonstrating or asserting superior skill, influence, achievement, worth, or power (Hogan & Roberts, 2000). Communal social motives induce people to fit in and get along – for example, by emphasizing their commonalities or showing how they are kind, cooperative, trustworthy, and generous partners. Agentic and communal motives are fundamental and universal elements of human nature (Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015; Baumeister & Leary, 1995), shaping and being shaped by the opportunities and challenges of social life throughout our evolutionary history (Chan, Wang, & Ybarra, this volume).

The current chapter shows that agency and communion function as cardinal axes along which we chart the course of our social lives. The chapter's first section explores how any direction we take – approaching agency, approaching communion, avoiding agency, and avoiding communion – can lead to good and bad outcomes. Therefore, as explained in the chapter's second section, we rely on upward, connective, downward, and contrastive social comparisons to steer us away from agentic and communal goals that are likely to be frustrating (e.g., competing with others whose assets decisively exceed our own) and towards those that are likely to be fulfilling (e.g., partnering with others with whom we share core attitudes and aims). The chapter's third section describes how, in addition, individuals differ in dispositions to incline in particular directions (e.g., towards agency, away from communion) due to factors such as life history, life stage, gender, and general sensitivities to costs or rewards. Finally, the chapter's fourth section examines the regulation of agentic and communal motives by testosterone and oxytocin.

## Costs and benefits of agency and communion

Generation after generation, the expression and regulation of agentic and communal motives has influenced individuals' inclusive fitness. Agentic motives propelled individuals to build skills, acquire resources, impress mates, intimidate rivals, and secure social positions in which they were well-treated by others. Communal motives compelled individuals to nurture and protect their offspring, and to join together with others to share resources and build safe, functioning communities. Moreover, individuals who more effectively demonstrated both agency and communion were more likely to be invited by others to form cooperative (including romantic) partnerships (Barclay, 2016). Unsurprisingly given these selection pressures, humans are keenly sensitive and responsive to agency and communion, both within and between groups.

Accordingly, acute as well as chronic threats to communion (e.g., being excluded or rejected) or agency (e.g., being disrespected or defeated) can evoke powerful physiological and emotional reactions that can undermine mental and physical well-being (Anderson et al., 2015; Cundiff & Smith, 2017; MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Smith & Jordan, 2015). Conversely, expressing and satisfying agentic and communal motives is associated with better mental, physical, and social functioning (Anderson et al., 2015; Crocker, Canevello, & Brown, 2017), and this is true across diverse cultures (Church et al., 2013). Accordingly, individuals are generally motivated to gain (or at least not lose) social rank – e.g., by augmenting and advertising their abilities and achievements and avoiding situations where they might get humiliated. Likewise, people are generally motivated to strengthen (or at least not weaken) their social bonds – e.g., by being loyal to their ingroup and avoiding actions that might get them excluded.

On the other hand, sometimes chasing agency and communion can yield more costs than benefits, especially when agency is pursued without concern for communion or communion is pursued without concern for agency (Helgeson & Fritz, 2000). Potential costs of agentic motives include pursuing vain or costly aspirations and debilitating or humiliating competitions; being judged as excessively agentic (e.g., presumptuous, pushy); and engendering malicious envy (Križan & Smith, 2014; van de Ven et al., 2014). Potential costs of communal motives include shouldering burdensome obligations to aide and protect others (Leary & Cottrell, 2013); moreover, if your beneficence is neither appreciated nor reciprocated, then you may feel exploited, resentful, and alienated, which can have a corrosive effect on your psychological and physical well-being (Crocker et al., 2017).

Agentic and communal goals are often risky because agency and communion are limited resources. Agency is limited because in many situations there can be only one “winner” who, for example, wins the prize, the princess, or the promotion. Communion is likewise limited because each person can only offer friendship, support, and intimacy to select individuals and not others. And there are inevitably opportunity costs: whenever we are pursuing one agentic or communal goal (e.g., to advance in a particular career or to connect with a particular

person), we are simultaneously not pursuing other agentic or communal goals (e.g., to advance in another career or connect with another person). In order to adaptively invest in social goals that promise to be fulfilling and divest from those that threaten to be frustrating, we must make social comparisons.

## Social motives and social comparisons

Social comparisons are assessments of where we stand relative to others, and can help us to estimate the likelihood of achieving specific agentic and communal goals (Locke, in press). *Horizontal comparisons* (Locke, 2003) refer to connective comparisons that place you close to and contrastive comparisons that place you far from the target other on dimensions such as attitudes (including communal attitudes towards each other, such as affection and loyalty) and lifestyle preferences. Whereas connective comparisons (perceived similarities) suggest that the target is likely to satisfy communal motives for a warm, supportive relationship, contrastive comparisons (perceived dissimilarities) suggest that the target is apt to frustrate such motives. A large literature confirms that connective comparisons tend to amplify communal motives towards others, while contrastive comparisons tend to dampen them (Bahns, Crandall, Gillath, & Preacher, 2017; Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008).

Numerous studies suggest that the inverse is also true: communal motives predict noticing and accentuating similarities, while ignoring and minimizing dissimilarities. When comparing with others with whom they feel connected or want to feel connected (e.g., liked or admired persons or ingroup members), people make more connective comparisons (sometimes referred to as showing more *assumed similarity* or *social projection*), and this is more true of people with stronger communal motives (Locke, Craig, Baik, & Gohil, 2012; Morrison & Matthes, 2011). People with stronger communal motives also tend to experience stronger positive feelings upon discovering similarities between themselves and others (Locke, 2003). Finally, people with stronger communal or collectivistic values tend to express culturally normative attitudes and actions and describe members of their friendship groups as having similar personalities, whereas people with stronger agentic or individualistic values tend to express distinctive attitudes and actions and describe members of their friendship groups as having personalities that differ from each other (Gebauer, Wagner, Sedikides, & Neberich, 2013; Locke, Zheng, & Smith, 2014).

*Vertical comparisons* (Locke, 2003) refer to upward comparisons that place the target above the self (e.g., “You ran faster”) and downward comparisons that place the target below the self (e.g., “I ran faster”) along agentic dimensions (e.g., physical, material, intellectual, or social assets and achievements). People can use vertical comparisons to assess their likelihood of success in particular domains, and adjust their agentic aspirations accordingly. The impact of vertical comparisons on agentic motives often hinges on further connective and contrastive comparisons with the comparison targets. Connective comparisons with upward targets that suggest you could eventually rise as high (and contrastive comparisons with downward targets

that suggest you would never fall as low) excite agentic motives (Buunk & Ybema, 1997; Lockwood, Shaughnessy, Fortune, & Tong, 2012; Wheeler, Martin, & Suls, 1997). Conversely, contrastive comparisons with upward targets that suggest that you can never rise as high (plus connective comparisons with downward targets that suggest you might fall as low) dampen agentic motives. Upward contrastive comparisons can also undermine communal motives and even provoke hostile impulses towards the superior target (Lam, Van der Vegt, Walter, & Huang, 2011; Tesser, 1988). Narcissistic individuals – who characteristically show stronger agentic than communal motives (Locke, 2000; Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012) – appear especially willing to denigrate or distance themselves from those who outperform them, thus sacrificing relationships to protect their illusions of superiority (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993; Nicholls & Stukas, 2011).

A shared consensus about who is superior can obviate potentially costly competitions. Indeed, individuals may deliberately avoid competitions by portraying themselves as inferior and ineffectual (e.g., “I am too timid to take charge”). However, assuming submissive, unagentic stances – if done chronically or excessively – can contribute to depression (Taylor, Gooding, Wood, & Tarrier, 2011). Studies of psychiatric patients found that depressed individuals gave disproportionate importance to *unagentic* goals (e.g., to avoid being confronted, humiliated, or scorned), and, during treatment, successfully calming these motives predicted reductions in distress (Locke et al., 2017; Thomas, Kirchmann, Suess, Bräutigam, & Strauss, 2012).

## Individual differences in agentic and communal motives

While social comparisons help individuals to align their social motives with their specific circumstances, individuals simultaneously show some stability in their social motives across situations. Individual differences in agentic and communal motives can be assessed using various implicit and self-report measures (Locke, 2011; Ojanen, Grönroos, & Salmivalli, 2005; Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012; Schultheiss & Brunstein, 2010; Trucco, Wright, & Colder, 2013). Although implicit and self-report measures only weakly correlate with each other (Locke, 2000) and each has strengths and weaknesses (McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989), research supports the construct validity of both approaches. For example, stronger self-reported communal motives have been found to predict volunteering to be crisis counselors (Rek & Dinger, 2016), feeling more satisfied with dyadic interactions (Locke & Sadler, 2007), and judging more harshly those who transgress communal norms (Kammrath & Scholer, 2011). Likewise, stronger implicit communal motives have been found to predict making self-disclosures (McAdams, 1992), attending to friendly faces (Schultheiss & Hale, 2007), and preferring interactive activities (Weinberger, Cotler, & Fishman, 2010). People also show enduring agentic and communal motives on behalf of groups with which they identify; for example, Locke (2014) found that US citizens who wanted the US to be generally more agentic and less communal when interacting with other countries typically favored the more politically conservative candidate in their presidential election.

Many factors contribute to individual differences in social motives. Below, I briefly consider the potential influence of life stage, life history, biological sex, and general approach/avoidance dispositions.

### ***Approach/avoidance***

Individual differences in general propensities to approach rewards or avoid costs may help explain individual differences in propensities to approach/avoid agency and communion. Supporting this hypothesis, agentic and communal motives are positively associated with extraversion (a trait linked to reward sensitivity and approach motives) and negatively associated with neuroticism (a trait linked to punishment sensitivity and avoidance motives) (Corr, DeYoung, & McNaughton, 2013; Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2003; Locke & Heller, 2017). A specific avoidance goal that may specifically moderate communal motives is disease avoidance. People who are chronically prone or situationally primed to feel repulsed by communicable pathogens tend to report lower levels of communion (e.g., friendliness, trust) toward strangers and foreigners, and instead may emphasize ingroup and family communion (Fincher & Thornhill, 2012; Murray & Schaller, 2016).

### ***Life stage and life history***

Lifespan psychosocial models (e.g., Erikson, 1950) articulate a normative pathway to developing sturdy, synergistic communal and agentic motives that benefit the individual and society. Infants experience powerful communal motives to remain close to familiar caregivers and uncommunal motives to be wary of unfamiliar adults, presumably because such motives reliably improved survival (Bowlby, 1969). Secure attachments build a foundation of trust and optimism that support agentic motives to experiment, explore, express preferences, and develop skills (Bowlby, 1988). As adolescents solidify an identity, they grow less preoccupied with unagentic and uncommunal motives (e.g., avoiding humiliation) (Trucco, Wright, & Colder, 2014).

From puberty onward, mating motives may evoke from some males extravagant expressions of risk-taking, non-conformity, generosity, and formidability, presumably because they advertise one's agency and rank, and – at least in ancestral environments – were effective in luring mates and deterring rivals (Griskevicius, Haselton, & Ackerman, 2015; Roney & von Hippel, 2010; Schaller, Kenrick, Neel, & Neuberg, 2017). As adulthood proceeds, though, people may generally place less importance on agentic motives and more on communal motives (Robinson, 2013), perhaps because adult occupational and family roles typically involve directing one's agency (mental, physical, material, and social resources) to help others. For example, parenthood entails employing one's agency to care for children lacking in agency to care for themselves. Indeed, our mammalian family tree suggests that communal motives may have been originally selected specifically for protecting and nurturing vulnerable offspring. In humans, though, the potential focus of communal concerns has greatly expanded, and can encompass sundry kith

and kin, strangers, and even other species (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010; Preston, 2013; Tomasello, 2014). Harnessing agency towards genuinely communal ends is the essence of the adult developmental task of generativity (Erikson, 1950) and normative conceptions of heroism (Frimer, Walker, Lee, Riches, & Dunlop, 2012; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015).

Alas, most people are not heroes. Communal motives, though expansive in principle (Singer, 1981), are often disconcertingly narrow in reality. For example, parents tend nurture their own children more than others' children and their biological children more than their stepchildren, and fathers may better nurture their children who resemble them more (Del Giudice & Belsky, 2010). Moreover, many people experience tensions rather than synergies between their agentic and communal motives. Such tensions can arise between agentic motives to acquire new sexual partners or produce more children and communal motives to invest in and nurture the children and partner one already has (Durante, Eastwick, Finkel, Gangestad, & Simpson, 2016; Fletcher, Simpson, Campbell, & Overall, 2015). Perhaps because of such tensions, men with stronger agentic power motives or weaker communal affiliation motives feel more constrained by fatherhood (Ruppen, Waldvogel, & Ehlert, 2016).

Life history theory suggests that a key moderator of communal motives to invest in relationships, children, and society is social/environmental unpredictability, especially during childhood (Del Giudice, Gangestad, & Kaplan, 2015; Ellis, Figueredo, Brumbach, & Schlomer, 2009). From the perspective of natural selection, if children's life spans are unpredictable, there may be little benefit in investing in nurturing a particular child; if others' fidelity is unpredictable, there may be little benefit in investing in a long-term relationship; and if the wider world is unpredictable, there may be little benefit in investing in improving your society. Indeed, exposure to unpredictable environments predicts more aggression, relationship instability, and narcissistic, Machiavellian, and antisocial personality traits (e.g., Ellis et al.; Jonason, Icho, & Ireland, 2016) – i.e., traits reflecting diminished communal (but undiminished agentic) motives (Locke, 2000; Locke & Christensen, 2007).

### ***Sex differences***

Because of constraints imposed by gestation, lactation, and menopause, males can potentially have a greater number of children, while females are required to make a greater minimum physiological investment in each child. Consequently, females tend to be choosier regarding with whom they will mate, obligating mate-seeking males to engage in intra- and inter-sexual competition (Buss, 1995). Generations of differential selection pressures favoring males pursuing rank and females providing care could lead to sex-linked differences in social motives; and indeed, compared to men, women typically place more importance on communion and less importance on agency (Locke & Heller, 2017; Schwartz & Rubel, 2005; see also chapter 9).

Sex differences in social motives may help explain sex differences in preferences for power versus status (Hays, 2013). Whereas power/dominance entails demonstrating you can and will use force or resources to punish and reward others, status/prestige



entails demonstrating you can and will use your skills or assets to benefit others (Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Locke and Heller (2017) found that in the workplace people with stronger agentic motives were more likely to want power, have power, and have their job satisfaction depend on their having power; in contrast, people with stronger communal motives were more likely to have status and to prefer status to power. Moreover, women's tendency to have stronger communal motives and weaker agentic motives than men partly explained women's stronger preference to have status rather than power.

## **Social chemistry**

Hormones and neuropeptides – most notably testosterone and oxytocin – help regulate agentic and communal motives, thus potentially contributing to the individual differences described above. Testosterone appears to amplify agentic motives to enhance and defend one's social rank. Oxytocin appears to amplify communal motives to nurture and protect one's social bonds and significant others.

### ***Oxytocin***

Oxytocin levels – whether measured or manipulated – are positively associated with engaged, nurturing, protective parental behavior (Feldman & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2017; Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 2017). Oxytocin levels increase after birth for both mothers and fathers, and involved fathers who interact with their infants show oxytocin levels comparable to that of mothers. During our evolutionary history the role of oxytocin has progressively expanded from facilitating parenting to facilitating other attachments, including romantic relationships (Fletcher et al., 2015; Griskevicius et al., 2015). For example, men in committed relationships who received oxytocin experienced their partner as more attractive (Scheele et al., 2013). However, among individuals prone to feeling insecure or vulnerable in relationships, elevating oxytocin may amplify those feelings and thus activate self-protective rather than communal behavior (Bartz, 2016).

More broadly, oxytocin heightens social concerns and facilitates bonding and benevolence among ingroup members, especially very close others (MacDonald & MacDonald, 2010). Simultaneously, oxytocin may sharpen ingroup-outgroup boundaries, and intensify wary, competitive, or hostile behavior toward potentially threatening outgroup members (Shalvi & De Dreu, 2014). Tellingly, priming the parental care motive produces similar effects, heightening aversion to potentially threatening others, such as strangers and distrusted outgroups (Eibach & Mock, 2011; Gilead & Lieberman, 2014).

### ***Testosterone***

Testosterone levels are positively correlated with self-report, observational, and implicit measures of agentic motivation (Knight & Mehta, 2014; Turan, Guo,

Boggiano, & Bedgood, 2014). Individuals with higher testosterone levels are more prone to desire an elevated social position and pursue assertive, competitive, or aggressive actions in order to attain and retain social rank (Mehta & Josephs, 2011). Testosterone also activates sexual and mating motives (Muller, 2017), but may inhibit bonding and nurturing (van Anders, Goldey, & Kuo, 2011; Roney & Gettler, 2015). For example, higher testosterone levels predict being less committed to one's current partner and more interested in alternative partners (Wardecker, Smith, Edelstein, & Loving, 2015), being more averse to intimate conversations following sexual activity (Denes, Afifi, & Granger, 2017), and among men responding less sympathetically to infant cries (Fleming, Corter, Stallings, & Steiner, 2002).

More generally, testosterone may stimulate agentic motives while suppressing communal motives. For example, men with higher testosterone levels tend to be more egocentric and antisocial (Johnson, Leedom, & Muhtadie, 2012; Wright et al., 2012) and express weaker communal motives (Turan et al., 2014). Interestingly, men's testosterone levels decline when they transition from mate-seeking to committing to a romantic partner or becoming a resident father – i.e., life circumstances in which rebalancing social motives away from agency (competing for new mating opportunities) and toward communion (caring for one's existing relationship and offspring) would generally have been adaptive (Roney & Gettler, 2015).

## Conclusions and future directions

Agency and communion are capacious concepts. Agentic motives encompass various specific motives (e.g., achieving, outcompeting, mating), which themselves encompass innumerable narrower goals (e.g., overcoming this obstacle, routing this rival, dazzling your dinner date). Communal motives likewise include various specific motives (e.g., connecting, nurturing, protecting), which themselves encompass innumerable narrower goals (e.g., calling your friend, comforting your baby, defending your spouse). Different agentic motives and goals have unique features, but also share features in common, and the same is true of different communal motives and goals. For example, if a variable such as upward comparisons, gender, or testosterone has an effect on one agentic motive, then it tends to have similar effects on other agentic motives. Likewise, if a variable such as connective comparisons, unpredictable childhood environments, or oxytocin has an effect on one communal motive, then it tends to have similar effects on other communal motives. Collectively, the evidence reviewed in this chapter suggests that agency and communion define fundamental categories of social motives and a productive framework for integrating insights from different fields, stimulating novel hypotheses, and arriving at a deeper understanding of human sociality.

Looking to the future, our world is increasingly populated and shaped by artificial intelligences (AIs). They are embedded in innumerable devices (e.g., cars, phones, “virtual assistants,” medical instruments, security systems) and every year

play a greater role in operating our homes and businesses as well as our financial, power, and communication systems. While AIs are motivated to achieve specific aims, they must also accept the limits of their agency (e.g., not try to exceed speed limits or pass faster vehicles). Furthermore, they should want to avoid connections with untrustworthy human or non-human agents (e.g., potential security threats), while also wanting to form and maintain mutually beneficial connections with agents whose goals align with theirs (e.g., with whom they can share pertinent information), which requires demonstrating their own trustworthiness. In other words, the more powerful and autonomous the AI, the more it should be regulated by a mixture of agentic, unagentic, communal, and uncommunal motives that can be flexibly applied to complex and novel situations. Thus, our understanding of the two fundamental social motives may help us not only to enhance human relating, but also to successfully weave AIs into the fabric of society.

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